

FLOOD, SALT, AND SACRIFICE: POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDERS IN GENESIS

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Part of our job in reading and understanding the Bible is using a lens of our times to view these eternal characters. I would propose using the lens of modern psychology to help understand the behaviors and outcomes of 3 biblical personalities.

Post traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], is a diagnosis being more commonly recognized since the initial use of the term in 1980. The National Institute of Mental Health defines it as follows:

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat.¹

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-IV] has a complicated definition for PTSD and sets criteria for its diagnosis. The information needed to make this diagnosis is only available after a full evaluation, observation and discussion with the patient over time.

The diagnosis of PTSD can be suspected in an individual who exhibits a significant behavior change after a traumatic event. I would propose that in the early narratives in Genesis – particularly the stories of Noah, Lot's wife, and Isaac – we see different manifestations of severe psychological stress and reactions consistent with PTSD in these biblical personalities.

Noah is introduced to us in the Book of Genesis and is described as an *Ish tzaddik, tamim hayah be-dorotav* [Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his generation] (Gen. 6:9). It also says, *Noah walked with God* (6:9). We know of his righteousness not only from this characterization, but also from Noah's actions. He demonstrates his loyalty and his acceptance of God's commandment by completing the building of an ark over a period of 120 years.

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After gathering all the animals into the ark and being joined by his family, Noah witnesses the complete annihilation of all known civilization. The midrashic literature is replete with narratives of how burdensome life on the ark was for Noah.² At the end of his stay on the ark, the Noah that emerges is no longer the same Noah that boarded the ark a year earlier. Gone is the righteous man whom we saw earlier. He is replaced by a broken man who has a drunken encounter with his son, after which we hear of him no more. After witnessing the destruction of the known world, it is not surprising that Noah turns to alcohol – a common outlet for patients with PTSD.³

We know much less about the background of Lot's wife. She was married to Abraham's nephew, and lived in the wicked city of Sodom. When God's messengers [angels] told Lot to take his family and leave Sodom, they were instructed by these messengers not to look back on Sodom and its destruction. Lot's wife disobeys and, like Noah, sees the world as she knows it destroyed. What is her reaction to this terrible loss of her entire world? She becomes *a pillar of salt* (19:26) – a catatonic reaction to stress. She becomes as immobile and rigid as a pillar of salt. This catatonic reaction, too, has been described in the psychiatric literature as a result of severe psychological trauma.⁴

Isaac, Abraham's son, one of the forefathers of Judaism, is destined for greatness. He is a child of a miraculous old-age pregnancy of Sarah, and she has the bad influences of Hagar and Ishmael banished from the household. We know little about his early life, except for the fact that he is destined to carry on Abraham's dynasty. We see him taken by Abraham to Moriah to be bound on an altar for sacrifice, and Abraham raising the slaughterer's knife to kill him. After the miraculous intervention of the angel of God, Isaac is a changed man. Some time thereafter, his mother dies. There is a lapse in the biblical narrative. The next we hear of Isaac is that Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac. Why does not Isaac go and find a wife for himself? It is strange that none of the other personalities we encounter in the Torah were incapable of finding their own spouses; only Isaac. Why is that? Could it be that the terrible psychological trauma he endured made Isaac incapable of leaving his home? Has he become withdrawn and untrusting? When he finally takes Rebekah for a wife, the Torah tells us that he brought her to Sarah's tent and found this consoling after his mother's death. Clearly

the double trauma of Isaac's near-death experience and mother's death, scarred (and scared) him; he needed a wife, Rebecca, to resolve the issue of his mother's death. However, as opposed to Noah and Lot's wife, Isaac was able eventually to resolve his post-traumatic stress and earn a place as one of our Patriarchs.

Part of the recovery is brought about by Rebekah, his wife; part of the recovery is brought about by God who brings a famine that forces Isaac to leave the insular comfort of his home. God tells Isaac to go to Gerar, where he is terrified that Rebekah will be taken from him, and that he will be killed. God reassures him that *'I will be with you and bless you'* (25:3). It is only when Isaac is able to trust in God and meet these challenges, that God blesses him and he becomes great. Part of successful therapy for stress-induced disorders is the development of a trusting relationship with one's therapist, in this case Isaac's Divine therapist.

We see three biblical characters, Noah, Lot's wife, and Isaac, each burdened by terrible psychological trauma. Two succumbed to and were destroyed by their PTSD, the other, with the help of a wife and "Divine reassurance," was able to overcome his psychological handicap. The mark of a successful biblical character in these cases is measured by their ability to successfully emerge from PTSD.

NOTES

1. National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

2. See for example Midrash Tanhuma, Noah, 9, where it is related that Noah worked round the clock feeding all the animals and that once when he was late with the lion's food he was mauled and rendered lame.

3. National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

<http://www.samhsa.gov/csatisasterrecovery/outreach/ptsdAndProblemsWithAlcohol.pdf>

4. R. Shiloh, B. Schwartz, A. Weizman M. Radwan, "Catatonia as an unusual presentation of post-traumatic stress disorder," *Psychopathology* 1995; 28 (6) pp. 285-90.